

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE



Fellowships
Philosophy

National Endowment for the Humanities

Division of Research Programs

Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a fellowships application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every application is different, depending on the requirements of the project, the stage of the research, the resources required, and the situation of the applicant. This sample includes only the narrative and the bibliography; it does not include the résumé or letters of recommendation.

Additional examples of funded applications can be found on the Division of Research section of the NEH website: <http://www.neh.gov/howeare/divisions/Research/index.html>

Project Title: Thomas Reid's Philosophy of Mind

Project Director: Ryan Nichols, Calvin College

Result: *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Thomas Reid's Philosophy of Mind

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796) is one of the most important philosophers in the 18th century, as the renewal of interest in his philosophical writings testifies. Reid's impact has been felt most keenly in the contemporary analyses of the structure of knowledge and the nature of freedom and agent causation. But the pattern of Reid's influence on contemporary work is appropriative for those attempting to employ the fruits of Reid's labours often do so without adequate knowledge of his highly systematized body of work. The two-fold aim of my book project is to provide a thorough, unified account of Reid's work on the mind in its historical context, and to assess its philosophical significance.

An accurate interpretation of Reid's texts, and the historical influences upon them, will unveil several Reidian insights that scholars have not identified with Reid. For example, his quasi-medieval analysis of cognition, appearing in his commencement addresses and elsewhere, has gone unappreciated. This lapse has left those interested in Reid without a crucial piece of his account of the mind, which has had deleterious consequences for interpretations of his theories of knowledge and perception.

Though my focus is upon interpreting and explaining Reid's philosophy of mind and not upon providing a corrective to the secondary literature, the reading offered in this book does counter what have become canonical interpretations of Reid in several respects. For instance, my interpretation of Reid's analysis of perceptual learning, crafted in light of his distinction between original and acquired perception, entails that claims about Reid endorsing a non-inferential account of perceptual knowledge are in need of revision.

By attending to the similarities between the Inquiry, Intellectual Powers, and archival material, I show that a challenging, defensible theory of mind and perception arises naturally from his corpus.

Annotated Contents of Book Project

Introduction

I will explain the scope of the book, my method and briefly situate this book in the context of work on Reid.

1. The Newtonian method. I intend to analyse Reid's goals in offering his account of mind, and highlight his empirical methodology. Reid claims to adopt Newton's method but so does Hume, who Reid takes to adopt a method at odds with his own. Analyzing the substance of Reid's allegiance to Newton (and Bacon) will provide a window into his method.

2. Thinking, from Reid's point of view. I hope to explain why Reid esteems medieval theories of cognition, though I argue that he never satisfactorily arrives at a complete theory of his own. Reid does not make use of a notion of formal causation as in Aquinas, but his theory of thought is also not representational.

3. Concept acquisition through 'suggestion'. Reid believes that conceptual states have intentional content. He offers an explanation about how conceptual states arise in perceptual events through 'natural suggestion'. I explain the importance of this vague term. In this connection I also explain Reid's odd 'experimentum crucis' (about the cognitive effects of a series of tactile sensations), and assess its implications

4. Intentionality and privileged access. I explain Hume's reductive analysis of the relation between ideas and impressions. I then develop two novel arguments in Reid against Hume's position. First, the

contingency of the connections that Hume posits between thoughts and contents prevents Hume from showing that thoughts have intentionality. Second, Hume's account of cognition entails scepticism about first-person access to the contents of thoughts.

5. The status of visible figure. I enumerate and explain several constraints on an account of 'visible figure'. These include the fact that, according to Reid, it must be capable of being the object of sight, serve his geometry for visible space, and be 'suggested' by retinal impressions. After assessing other interpretations, I argue that only by treating visible figure as a relational property and as the object of seeing can we make sense of Reid's theory of visual perception.

6. Visual Perception. From my interpretation of visible figure it follows that Reid's theory of visual perception is not direct. This is problematic. Reid criticizes his predecessors for engendering skepticism because they assert we only perceive ideas directly. However, I next show that, in the sense of directness with which Reid was concerned, his theory of visual perception is direct.

7. Qualities and our concepts of them. In contrast to Locke's metaphysical approach, Reid adopts an epistemic tact. Notions of primary qualities are notions that are apprehended without any necessarily apprehended intermediary, and the contents of these notions are of the essential natures of the qualities in question. Our notions of secondary qualities, however, are mediated by our apprehension of sensation experiences, and the contents of these notions are the unknown causes of our sensations. I raise two major difficulties with this interpretation and respond to them.

8. Perceptual learning and conceptual content. Reid's account of perceptual learning examines the nature of cognition and inference in perception. By a careful examination of his distinction between original and acquired perception I show that most perception has an inferential component. Charting this distinction through his major works and unpublished material provides evidence for a third category, 'habituated perception'. This interpretation provides significant continuity across Reid's corpus.

9. The structure of sensation. Sensations are qualitative mental states, whereas perceptions incorporate a cognitive component. Reid is not committed to the necessity of sensations in perceptions. He presciently appeals to evolutionary factors in his argument to show that the capacity for sensation is "of earlier growth than reason." I apply Reid's analysis to Locke's inverted spectrum case to show that Reid's position is borne out by empirical data.

10. Answers to Molyneux's question. Molyneux's question is this: if someone blind from birth were newly given sight, could they by vision alone distinguish between a cube and a sphere set before them? In the Inquiry Reid addresses the question in two separate passages (in 6.3 and 6.11), offering different and incompatible answers. I will argue that whether a blind man given sight could visually discriminate between a sphere and cube depends, for Reid, upon further features of the cognitive abilities of the individual in question.

11. The science of the mind. I will analyze Reid's substance dualism and its epistemic status to draw inferences about his views on the limits of natural science. This involves study of Reid's opinion on controversies of the day, e.g. about 'active matter'. I hope to explore the relation between Reid's commitment to dualism and his religious belief.

12. Common sense and the limits of epistemology. Reid's draconian limitations upon knowledge of the mind and world are at odds with his 'common sense' epistemology. I will describe Reid's common sense method by comparisons with his predecessors' methods. In particular, I intend to return to the discussion of Chapter 1 to show the extensive similarities between Reid and Newton and their mutual appeals to a

common sense method. In matters of method we find Reid's most important differences with Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

Status of Project and Work to be Accomplished

I have a book contract with Oxford University Press for this project. They offered me a contract on the strength of chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, which I have published in three articles. I also showed OUP drafts of chapters 2, 3, 9, and 11, which were thought to need significant work (I have completed chapter 9 to my satisfaction). The remaining three chapters are yet to be written. Were I awarded the five month NEH grant, I would seek (i) to write chapters 1, 10 and 12, (ii) rewrite chapters 2, 3 and 10, (iii) incorporate my archival research into the entire manuscript and (iv) create an index for the book. I now explain what is involved in the first three tasks.

I have done a small amount of reading for chapters 1, 10 and 12. 12 will be the easiest to write since the research required is largely contained within Reid's corpus. With chapters 1 and 10 I must do a considerable amount of far-flung reading. For chapter 1 I must research Newton, Newtonianism and its origins in Bacon. This will involve some work with primary texts in Latin, and familiarizing myself with the application of Newtonian methods in philosophies prior to Reid. I will also need to examine some of Reid's local influences, in the persons of Alexander Gerard, James Gregory and George Turnbull. Reid adopts the interpretations of Newton offered by these Aberdonian colleagues, who thereby structure the way in which Reid was to think about the mind and science.

For chapter 10 I need to revisit the history of the Molyneux problem. I must study the early experiments thought to confirm the belief that the newly sighted person could not distinguish between the cube and the sphere, e.g. that done by Cheselden; and the approaches to the question by Reid's predecessors. Sensitivity to empirical concerns and to the history of the problem are necessary because Reid's approach is so idiosyncratic—because it is motivated by a principled disregard for the history of the problem (so I will argue).

I have preliminary drafts of chapters 2 and 3 about conception but I have discovered they contain a major flaw. I failed to distinguish between the acquisition of discursive concepts from the acquisition of intentional conceptual abilities. Reid's texts can be ambiguous between these two options because 'conception' for Reid refers to both the application of discrete concepts to an object, and to the simple, intentional apprehension of a state of affairs. Thus I need to add to and rewrite these chapters. Furthermore, in chapter 3 I have mistakenly interpreted Hume by sticking too close to Reid. This must be fixed, and will require a substantial investment of time in the Hume literature to get this right.

Lastly, I must incorporate into the manuscript the fruits of my research in Reid's archival papers. Some 95% of Reid's unpublished papers are here at Aberdeen in the Birkwood Collection. I am taking advantage of the fact that I have a post here (which ends in July) to carry out research on the papers. Due to the size of the relevant material I have collected, I elected not to incorporate this research into the manuscript piecemeal. I must modify my theses in accordance with the manuscript evidence, and rewrite and add to the chapters accordingly.

I believe this work can be completed in about five months of non-teaching time. In July I will move from Scotland to the U.S. and as of August I will be teaching in a two-year non-tenure track post at a small college. The teaching load will be seven courses per year, which will prevent me from working on this manuscript during the academic year without a grant of some kind. As I am at an early point in my career, I want neither to rush the completion of the manuscript and submit an inferior text to OUP nor to delay the completion of the book by a couple years. This is in part why research leave would be especially valuable

to me now.

Anticipated Results

I hope my book will serve as a benchmark for interpreting Reid on perception. This will be the only synoptic and fully systematic analysis of Reid's theory of perception available. It will mark a major advance in our understanding of Reid's depth of thought and of his place in the history of the philosophy of mind. The audience for the completed work will be historians of philosophy, analytic philosophers working in perception and mind, and upper-level undergraduates taking courses in Reid or the Scottish Enlightenment. The book is suitable for undergraduate courses in part because I define terms and explicitly enumerate premises in arguments throughout.

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